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SUBJECT: ARUNACHAL PRADESH'S TAWANG DISTRICT: FEELING VULNERABLE ON CHINA'S FRONTIER

¶1. (SBU) Summary. During a visit to Arunachal Pradesh's West Kameng and Tawang Districts, Kolkata PAO spoke with students and faculty at area colleges about the U.S. election process, as well as opportunities to study in the U.S. Conversations with local leaders and ordinary citizens in both districts highlighted the vulnerability of the region to any moves by the Chinese to reassert long-standing territorial claims. The people of Tawang district feel especially vulnerable, according to the spiritual head of the Tawang Monastery and a local political leader. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a visit to western Arunachal Pradesh from September 22 - 26, Kolkata Public Affairs officer (PAO) visited the two district headquarters of Bomdila (West Kameng district) and Tawang town (Tawang district). While a purpose of the visit was public outreach and interaction with students and faculty at area colleges and schools, as well as to make contact with local NGOs, conversations with community leaders, especially in Tawang, highlighted the feeling of vulnerability in this remote corner of India towards possible Chinese designs on the region.

Bomdila College Students Enthusiastic Over U.S. Elections

¶3. (SBU) Kolkata PAO and local FSN first journeyed to Bomdila, a town spilling down verdant slopes at an altitude of 8,000 feet. The road to Bomdila from the border town of Bhalukpong has been heavily damaged in parts by the recent monsoon rains, and the trip from the Assam border took eight hours of hard driving by four-wheel drive vehicle. A heavy Indian military presence can be seen in the Tenga River valley midway between Bhalukpong and Bomdila, with road repairs in full swing. While Bomdila has a helipad, there is at present no regular helicopter service to this district headquarters.

¶4. (U) During the first-ever Public Affairs visit to Bomdila College, Kolkata PAO addressed an enthusiastic audience of several hundred students and faculty on the subject of the U.S. election process and the current election campaign in the United States. And while Bomdila has poor internet reliability and worse land communications, the students proved surprisingly well-informed about the American presidential candidates, peppering PAO with informed questions about the candidates' individual stands on foreign policy, the economy and the future of the U.S.-India relationship.

15. (SBU) Continuing north, PAO and FSN journeyed a further eight hours from Bomdila to Tawang district, which entails a bone-shattering ride over the Sela Pass at 14,000 feet. Much of the road has been very damaged by this year's monsoon rains and the military is making attempts to keep the route open, with modest success at this point. All military equipment to Tawang district and the border with China must travel this road so the military consequences of not maintaining this line of communication are high. On much of the route from Bomdila to Tawang Indian military bulldozers and troops can be seen laboring to remove landslides.

16. (SBU) In Tawang district, a verdant series of valleys with an average elevation of 10,000 feet and an estimated population of 80,000, religious and social life revolves around the Tawang Monastery, founded in 1650 and the largest Tibetan Buddhist monastic community in India, with 450 active monks in residence. The inhabitants of Tawang are the Monpas, ethnically and culturally related to Tibetans and speaking a Tibetan dialect. For much of their history the Monpas have been ruled by Tibetans from across the current line of control on Tawang's northern border with the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China. The sixth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang and his ancestral home is still a pilgrimage site. The current and 14th Dalai Lama, when he fled the Chinese takeover of Lhasa in 1959, crossed into India at Tawang and rested there before continuing his journey. Tawang is the closest point in India to Lhasa, and the Monpas of Tawang have always felt a kinship with their co-religionists to the north.

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Chief Lama Says Tawang on China's Radar Screen

17. (SBU) During a private interview in his chambers with the Venerable Tulku Rinpoche, the 42-year-old current head of Tawang Monastery, the Rinpoche told Kolkata PAO that the relationship between the Dalai Lama and the Tawang Monastery has historically always been very close. For this reason it was natural for the 14th Dalai Lama to seek sanctuary in Tawang in 1959, and the Dalai Lama has made it a point to visit Tawang several times over the past decade. In 1997 a major renovation of the monastery was completed, paid for by the Dalai Lama's administration in Dharamsala. The Rinpoche went on to point out that the spiritual sway of the Tawang Monastery reaches beyond the district, and he noted that many of the pilgrims who attend festivals at the monastery come by foot over the passes from districts in eastern Bhutan. There are villages north of the line of control in the TAR where people speak Monpa, and they would also come if the Chinese permitted them.

18. (SBU) The Rinpoche explained to PAO, in a mixture of English and translated Monpa, that he feels a special responsibility for Tawang monastery and the people of Tawang because "I founded this monastery almost 400 years ago." He was referring to the fact that although in his current incarnation he was born 42 years ago in Dirang near Bomdila, he is considered an incarnation of Mera Lama, the founder of Tawang monastery in the 17th century. Because of this responsibility, he feels deeply that the attitude of the Chinese towards Tawang "is very dangerous." The Rinpoche believes that the Chinese, while claiming most of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, actually have more immediate designs on Tawang district. This, he states, is precisely because of Tawang's "historical close ties to Tibet." He wonders if the central government in New Delhi cares enough about "little Tawang" to defend it.

Rising Political Star Echoes the Rimpoche's Fears

¶9. (SBU) The current Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, in office since April 2007, is Mr. Khandu Dorjee of Tawang. PAO spoke with his nephew, Mr. Tetsin Chombay Kee, who runs an NGO called Yuva based in Tawang, as well as being managing director of the Kee Relations and Event Management Company based in the state capital of Itanagar. Mr. Chombey was in Tawang the same time as PAO and acted as an unofficial host and guide.

¶10. (SBU) Mr. Chombey, educated at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai, successful in business and now part of the most powerful family in Arunachal, denies he is interested in a career in politics but did not hide his close ties to business and community leaders throughout Tawang. He also spoke openly of the concern that people in Tawang have about China's intentions. "Everybody here knows that they can come when they want," he states. And like the Rinpoche, Mr. Chombey believes that the Chinese, no matter what their ultimate decision to be concerning claims to most of Arunachal, are really serious about Tawang being part of China. Tawang, Mr. Chombey reasons, is really just part of Tibet in Chinese eyes, which in turn makes it part of China. "We're special to the Chinese, and that's not good," Mr. Chombey says. And what makes this grab possible are two points: "Nobody outside of Tawang cares" what happens to Tawang; and the poor state of communication. How can the Indian military defend Tawang, given the condition of the road? On the Chinese side, Mr. Chombey says, "everybody knows they have a good highway for their troops."

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Tawang's physical vulnerability is obvious to anyone who travels overland to reach it. The current two-day journey from the Assam-Arunachal border to Tawang is barely passable, in spite of the military's landslide removal efforts. Even with repair, this road that supplies the Indian defensive line on Tawang district's northern border with the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China is merely a one-lane dirt track in many places and would be sorely taxed to support a large-scale movement of troops and supplies in case of border incursions or other activity. The inhabitants of Tawang, only too aware of their vulnerability, hope that New Delhi will keep them in mind should the Chinese move south, but they are not optimistic anyone in the capital cares enough to go out on a limb for them.
PAYNE